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ABSTRACT

As schools and youth-serving agencies struggle to meet the needs of at-risk children and families, interagency collaboration is being proposed as an effective, efficient means of service delivery. However, most writing on interagency collaboration has been from the perspective of service providers, not schools, and has given little consideration to the special concerns of collaboration in rural communities. This paper examines rural issues in agency collaboration from the perspective of one principal in a rural school. A literature review describes three models of the relationship between service organizations (referral-based, cooperative, collaborative); discusses schools as service organizations; and emphasizes the central importance of the school principal in leading change toward collaboration. Multiple in-depth interviews were conducted with a high school principal in a small midwestern town. The principal was regarded as innovative and caring by peers and was not currently involved in formal restructuring of services for at-risk families and children. The interviews discussed school support services to high-risk students and families, the school's contacts with other service organizations, interactions between the school and the area education agency, barriers to interagency communication, gaps in services available locally, confidentiality issues, the flexibility and informality of the school's current system, and problems of collaboration related to "turf" issues and lack of resources. (SV)

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Interagency Collaboration: A View from the Rural Principal's Chair

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Interagency Collaboration: A View from the Rural Principal's Chair

Many schools and youth serving agencies across the country are struggling to meet the needs of at risk families and students. An assortment of services for helping at risk families and children have sprung up. But there is widespread concern that the way these services have traditionally been delivered has become over-specialized and fragmented. This, critics say, results in serious gaps and expensive overlaps in services (see, for example, Kirst, 1989). The model of *interagency collaboration* has been proposed as a way of improving the delivery of services to students and families at risk. Kirst (1991) defined collaboration as an approach "whereby organizations join to create improvements in children's services that are no single agency's responsibility" (p. 617). The agencies involved align their goals and procedures so that they remain structurally separate, but no longer function as autonomous organizations in offering services.

Clearly there is much promise in such an approach. In this time of shortages of money and personnel, the idea of eliminating waste in providing services is important to consider. And from the point of effectiveness of service delivery, eliminating redundancies while at the same time filling in gaps is laudable. A review of the literature, however, suggests that most of the writing on interagency collaboration is from the perspective of service providers and not schools. It does not appear that the potential impacts of interagency collaboration with respect to schools have been well articulated. The place of the school in interagency collaboration needs to be more carefully considered. Although schools are often placed at the center of such efforts because they are accessible to families and have prolonged contact with children, schools are historically, practically, and legally fundamentally different in nature, scope, and mission than other family and youth serving organizations. In addition, little consideration has so far been paid to the issue that the needs for, and concerns with, interagency collaboration in rural communities may be different than in other types of communities.

The purpose of our study was to further examine these issues through in-depth interviews with one principal in a rural school that was not involved in formal restructuring towards collaborative services for at risk families and students. It was decided that such a study could begin to delineate the issues and the potential impacts involved in rural schools collaborating more with service agencies.

Background

In this section, we review important concepts from areas of literature related to interagency collaboration and the schools. First we describe three models of the relationship between service organizations. Next we describe schools as service organizations. Last we discuss the central importance of the school principal in leading the kinds of change entailed in a move to collaboration.

Models of the Relationship Between Service Organizations

The literature distinguishes three levels of interactivity among agencies supporting at risk students and families. Levels of interactivity are best thought of as existing on a continuum and not as discrete phenomena. But for discussion and comparison, it is helpful to divide the continuum into three segments. From the least close relationship to the most close, these are referral-based, cooperation, and collaboration.

The referral-based model is focused on crisis, on identifying a single problem. Kirst (1991) described referrals as "episodic" and "discontinuous." Referrals typically involve little systematic, planned, or documented exchange of information among the agencies--including schools--providing services to children and their families. For example, a referring teacher or school counselor may never know if a child actually received services, and, even if services are provided, is unlikely to receive any feedback useful for working with the child at school.

Cooperative interactions may include more formal information sharing, networking, and joint needs assessment activities. In cooperative arrangements, institutions retain

their identity and administrative independence (Kirst, 1991). Melaville and Blank (1991) argued that although cooperative arrangements do much to improve coordination among existing services, they do little to address the "remedial" or reactive nature of efforts to help children and families. They and others (see, for example, Kirst, 1989; or Payzant, 1992) expressed concern that single issue and crisis-oriented services fail to address multifaceted problems in families that need comprehensive solutions.

Collaborative efforts are more comprehensive. They require that participating agencies refocus on the needs of children and families instead of trying to maintain the traditional tasks and "turf" of each agency (Kirst, 1991; Melaville & Blank, 1991; Payzant, 1992). Bruner (1991) suggested that to participate collaboratively agencies must review and redefine their organizational missions. This is accomplished by (a) jointly developing common goals and outcomes, (b) planning for equitable sharing of responsibility (resources, work, and accountability) for achieving goals, and (c) reassigning expertise, information, and other resources based on the strategic plan.

Schools as Service Organizations

Farrar and Hampel (1987) found that schools replicate the pattern of specialization and fragmentation in helping services within their walls. Gaps or duplication of services seem to be possible within schools as well as outside of them. School helping professionals, such as nurses, counselors, and deans of students, are stretched very thinly across grade levels and schools. Duplication may exist since all of these personnel may provide assistance to students and families regarding peer or family issues, relationships, teen sexuality, etc. In many schools, schedules, office assignments, work load, and job descriptions cause these individuals to work in relative isolation. Their services are offered to students on a drop-in basis. As such, they provide reactive, crisis oriented service without the means to provide long-term management or comprehensive support for families. In serious situations, schools refer students to specialized "outside"

agencies. Once referred, there is typically little consistent communication among schools and the agencies providing services (Melaville & Blank, 1991).

But in some essential ways, schools cannot simply be considered just another helping agency. Their primary mission has historically been the development of "normal" students, focusing mostly on cognitive aspects, although affective and physical aspects are usually included as well. It may not be possible, or even desirable, for schools to become as fully collaborative as the literature on interagency collaboration suggests.

In any case, most schools at present are not collaborative in the full sense, and for them to become so would be no small task. To a considerable extent, whether a school becomes more collaborative or not has a lot to do with the principal of the school.

The Central Importance of the School Principal

Within schools, principals have been shown to play a crucial role in effecting such deeply rooted changes as those implicit in the collaborative model (Fullan, 1991). Although there is a growing body of literature on the topic of interagency collaboration, little has been done to describe the perspective of school principals concerning what is and what ought to be the level or intensity of interactivity among schools and other agencies. Such information could help policy makers consider what conceptual, ethical, and pragmatic concerns emerge when interagency collaboration is considered from a principal's perspective.

One of the most critical tasks for those initiating collaborative efforts may be garnering the full support and enthusiasm of all stakeholders, including school principals (Melaville & Blank, 1991; Boyd, 1991). Boyd's 1991 study of the Leadville Center Project found that without the involvement and active support of key personnel charged with implementation, collaboration may exist in name only, and change will be incremental rather than systemic. Unless convinced of the value of interagency collaboration, school principals may be reluctant to add new hats to those they already wear (Beck & Murphy, 1993). Research supports principals' assertions that the claims on

their time exceed the hours available to meet the demand (see, for example, Fullan, 1991). However, because principals are relatively powerful and autonomous in their positions, they do have some flexibility in deciding what major undertakings will or will not be attended to in their buildings. Those seeking to implement collaborative efforts will do well to remember what Fullan (1991) wrote about principals and change: "As we shall see, effective principals do not neglect stability in favor of change. Since change is not always progress, the effective principal helps to protect the school from ill-conceived or unwanted change" (p. 152). For principals to buy into collaboration, a case will have to be made to them.

To gain insight into the perspectives of principals toward collaboration, we decided to interview one principal in depth. Below we describe our approach and findings.

Procedure

To explore school perspectives related to moving towards interagency collaboration, a case study was developed of a practicing secondary principal who was not currently involved in formal restructuring of services for at risk families and students. This principal was selected purposively, using peer nominations to locate innovative and caring principals. We chose these parameters so the principal would simultaneously be concerned about the services students were receiving, but not yet have a vested interest in seeing collaboration as such occur. The results described below are not presented as representing all principals—we focused only on one principal—but as representing important perspectives related to the conceptual issues developed above.

Mr. Peterson (a pseudonym), works in a small mid-Western town within commuting distance of a relatively small metropolitan area. The clientele of his school, Prospero High School (a pseudonym), are predominately rural and middle to lower-middle class. Mr. Peterson characterizes parents as "supportive." There are approximately 400 students in grades 9 through 12 in the building.

To develop the case study, Mr. Peterson was interviewed multiple times following a qualitative approach (Spradley, 1979; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The interviews were taped, and the transcripts were analyzed qualitatively using an inductively-derived coding scheme. Mr. Peterson read and corrected the transcripts. In addition, we shared our interpretations with him out of a sense of ethical responsibility to him and to the reader, and to gather further data through his responses. He did not disagree with anything in the data and interpretations presented below.

Results and Discussion

First of all, is collaboration even an issue worth pursuing for Mr. Peterson? In spite of the school's relative lack of discipline problems, he voiced concerns for the quality of some students' lives. "Kids are so needy," he said. He estimated that he has at least 20 contacts with other adults in the system every day with regard to the academic and non-academic needs of individual students. School surveys indicated that at least 10% of the school's students have experienced some form of sexual abuse. Mr. Peterson spoke of incidences of threatened suicide and increases in students suffering from eating disorders. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the school is not considered an "at risk" school, Mr. Peterson has considerable contact with service organizations and is concerned with their quantity and quality.

Do Mr. Peterson and his staff operate more proactively or reactively regarding the needs of at risk students? The existence of an at risk team at the school, of which Mr. Peterson is an active member, is an indicator of efforts to be more proactive. Still, the stories that emerged from our conversations reveal a system that is, perhaps unalterably so, somewhat reactive and certainly crisis-oriented. Mr. Peterson shared two stories which help illustrate this point.

The first is the story of an underage female student who became the victim of date rape. The young woman came to Mr. Peterson report the event. Mr. Peterson called local

law enforcement officers who interviewed the young woman, called the Department of Health Services, and notified her parents. A second story involved a young woman who threatened to leave school after a verbal confrontation with a female schoolmate. Called to Mr. Peterson's office, the girl's father threatened to "beat her butt" if the girl failed to remain at school. Mr. Peterson said he was able to convince the father to adopt another approach to handling the girl. Although the line between proactive and reactive can sometimes become fuzzy, in these stories the pattern is predominantly reactive. Certainly, both stories were triggered by "crisis."

Less consistent with the roles assumed by secondary principals in the schools Farrar and Hampel (1987) studied, Mr. Peterson appeared to be quite active in addressing the needs of students. Perhaps due to the relatively small size of the high school, a typical feature of rural schools, Mr. Peterson may have more opportunity to be directly involved. When Mr. Peterson spoke of the student assistance team, he said "We meet tomorrow." Sometimes individual students come directly to him for help. He explained, "It depends on the student. I had a girl come in a year ago and tell me she was sexually abused. So it just depends on their relationship with me." Obviously, Mr. Peterson chooses to be involved in the lives of students. Differences between large and small schools in this regard may prove fertile ground for further inquiry. The different leadership styles of principals may play a role here as well.

With regard to the specialization and fragmentation of services, two pictures emerge. On one hand, Mr. Peterson and his staff obtain most needed services through an area education agency (AEA). AEAs in Iowa offer a range of support services including development and learning specialists, family social workers, and psychologists for special education students. Interactions between schools and AEAs approach collaboration on the continuum suggested in this study. On the other hand, other referrals must be to very specialized and autonomous agencies. Those Mr. Peterson mentioned included

alternative schools or education programs, local law enforcement agencies, hospitals, and psychological treatment facilities.

In probing Mr. Peterson's views on moving to collaboration, we found he did see weaknesses in existing services, weaknesses that collaboration might improve. On the other hand, he also saw some advantages in the current system and expressed significant concerns with moving to collaboration. Each of these areas will be addressed below.

Problems with Existing Services

First, in the existing system Mr. Peterson is working under, principals must form their own networks of agencies and helping professionals. The selection of services to be recommended appears to be a matter of personal experience and contacts rather than any formal networking by the district. "Well, I think the first couple of years you're calling the first one you can find who can help you at all. But after that you're sorting out who does a better job." Mr. Peterson spoke of learning to match students' needs to the skills and characteristics of providers, sometimes even to particular individuals providing a service. Mr. Peterson said he sometimes refers students to agencies in distant cities for treatment because that is where he feels they'll get the best results.

A second problem is that communication among services is poor. Once students are receiving services from outside agencies, communication with agencies is limited. According to Mr. Peterson, there is no systematic flow of information, nor do agency personnel have time to follow through. As he put it:

> It's a mess. I mean, it depends on the individuals you're dealing with, how competent or busy they are. There are a lot of competent people out there who are just too darn busy with their work load, especially people who work with kids.

Other important barriers to communication, according to Mr. Peterson, include concerns about students' rights, confidentiality, parents' rights, and other legal constraints. Interestingly, he noted that clearly understanding the edges and boundaries of who has a legal right to what information is more of a problem than the specific regulations

themselves. This concern is linked to problems in defining the school's relationships to students and families when families begin to fall apart legally and otherwise. For example, the young woman described earlier, who was a victim of date rape, asked Mr. Peterson not to notify her parents. In the absence of clear regulations governing that situation, Mr. Peterson honored the girl's request. He knew something of the family situation and felt it was in the girl's best interest to follow her wishes. Law enforcement personnel later informed the parents. The parents then threatened to sue Mr. Peterson for failing to notify them immediately. However, lawyers on both sides appeared to agree that Mr. Peterson acted within his authority and the case never came to court. In the end, Mr. Peterson said, when rules are unclear, he does what "seems to be in the best interest of students."

Third, Mr. Peterson said that he sometimes acts as a "go between" among other agencies. Pondering the possibilities for changing the relationships rural schools currently have with outside agencies, Mr. Peterson noted that communication is currently a problem regardless of district size. However, he asserted that communication between schools and individual agencies is often better than between agencies themselves. Schools, Mr. Peterson said, sometimes find themselves facilitating that communication as well. "Cooperation is a goal for all of us. Time is the big issue. All agencies dealing with kids are overwhelmed. More communication would be nice, but you handle the most urgent cases first. Communication just isn't a priority."

Fourth, there are some gaps in services locally available. Mr. Peterson identified a gap in nearby services for the treatment of eating disorders. A serious and growing problem, Mr. Peterson is recommending that families seek treatment at a center more than 75 miles from his school.

Finally, legal restraints and guidelines for respecting student confidentiality are unclear. Once students are receiving services from outside agencies, communication with agencies is limited. According to Mr. Peterson, there is no systematic flow of

information, nor do agency personnel have time to follow through. For example, in the case of a student placed outside of the home for one of a variety of possible reasons, schools are often left guessing about whether or when a given student will return to the school. In any case, suggestions for supportive planning are often minimal or absent.

Advantages of the Current System

While acknowledging that the current system is far from perfect, it is possible to identify some advantages with it as opposed to moving towards a fully collaborative system. First, the flexibility and informality of the current system allow school personnel to "shop around" for the best services when choices are available. Mr. Peterson noted that it is sometimes important to match service providers with students or their families. Whether personalities or structures are the issue, the ability to work together is an important determinant of the progress the student will ultimately make.

Second, the separateness of the agencies allows the school district and community to sidestep some of the painful, divisive, ideologically burdened debates that might occur in the process of redefining organizational goals, missions, and resource allocations. The questions of who should be served, in what way, and for what purpose may need to be faced over the long term, but in the short term, overemphasis on debating them might keep anything from happening or fracture the community.

Third, a minimum number of individuals become privy to sensitive information about families. Although this appears to be exactly opposite to the concern expressed above about lack of communication, in a small town confidentiality is an equally valid concern.

Fourth, the current system allows students to choose which adults they are comfortable approaching. Mr. Peterson agreed that the existing system in his rural high school is informal and fluid, but echoing Farrar and Hampel (1987), he pointed out that informality offers students some real advantages. Mr. Peterson put it this way:

> It has to be informal. It would be more difficult for students to get involved if they saw a bureaucratic system in front of them. Ideally you have an expert in every problem students might encounter but that's probably not possible due to students' comfort levels. Size makes a big difference. As schools get bigger, I can see it happen [a more formal system]. You would tend to lose personal knowledge of kids. Here, because kids know the adults, they know where to go.

Fifth, the overall quality of services available is good. In Mr. Peterson's judgment, students and families who do access services are generally well served and return to the school and community with a greater degree of functionality.

Issues Involved with Moving Toward Collaboration

Given the fact that he identified both strengths as well as weakness in the current system, a move towards collaboration does not seem like an unmixed blessing to Mr. Peterson, nor does the process appear simple. Here are issues related to moving towards collaboration as developed from the interviews.

First, moving toward collaboration could either increase a principal's workload or decrease it depending on the model adopted and how lines of authority are determined. Principals may be asked, for example, to supervise additional staff and to become knowledgeable about new disciplines and social service delivery systems. On the other hand, principals like Mr. Peterson could potentially be released from at least part of the burden of personally selecting and recommending specific service venues.

Second, initiatives aimed at increased collaboration or cooperation must be adequately funded. Collaboration, especially in its design and early implementation, will require new skills and a great deal of time for developing relationships, identifying goals, and resolving issues.

Third, the question of "turf" must be adequately resolved. Would collaborative efforts aid schools in refocusing on their academic mission? Mr. Peterson noted:

> Collaboration would allow schools to refocus on schooling only if that meant those agencies could give more resources back to schools. It goes back to the question of turf. The whole idea of collaboration is to enhance the use of resources. First, you must have the mindset that there are wasted resources there to begin with. Agencies are going to be very reluctant to do that.

Fourth, careful attention should be given to whether the collaborative model really has the potential to make a significant difference in the lives of students and families. Mr. Peterson said of the structure implied in the model:

> I would never limit myself to local agencies, to those involved in the collaborative. I would have to be convinced, to see how it would make a difference. I'm not sure how it could improve the delivery of services. Informally, you already do a little of this.

As Mr. Peterson further contemplated the model, however, he backed away from earlier concerns about having interagency personnel in his building and began to see real possibilities. He stated:

> It would take away responsibility from the principal [meant not in terms of legal responsibilities, but in terms of the principal being responsible to make the whole thing work]. Collaboration might eliminate the need for schools to be a link between agencies. This model has some real possibilities for success if it could be put into action. Maybe for larger districts.

Looking toward the future, Mr. Peterson predicted there would come a time when all schools may have their own social worker. He seemed somewhat ambivalent, however, about the cost/benefit ratio of such an arrangement. On the one hand, he identified situations when the services of a social worker would be valuable. For example, in the case of the young woman threatening to leave school and her potentially abusive father, Mr. Peterson said:

> It would have been perfect for a social worker. There the girl involved was not special education, so I'm on my own with the counselor. This is a family that could definitely use some help. There's no place to turn under the current system until he actually hits her.

In Iowa, special education students qualify for social work services provided by the AEA. In many districts, school personnel find it difficult to serve students who are not special education until their need reaches crisis proportions. For these students, an in-school social worker could be a real advantage. On the other hand, Mr. Peterson suspected that if social workers (or, presumably, other helping professionals) were located in the building as the result of an effort to launch interagency collaboration, principals will become their direct supervisors. He recognized the difficulty interagency personnel could encounter in trying to identify who has the authority to make important decisions when the governing body is an umbrella of disparate agencies. In emergencies, someone must have the authority to determine a course of action. Although acknowledging the value of participatory management in long range planning, he commented, "When you have a brush fire, you can't call a committee meeting."

Fifth, concerns regarding the rights of families and the relationship of families to student problems would need to be resolved. On the one hand, Mr. Peterson believes that the serious academic, attendance, or discipline problems students exhibit at school are often linked with problems at home. Mr. Peterson said, "Well, I think you always look at the individual child first. But that leads you to family problems almost every time. A lot of them have to do with alcohol abuse in the homes." If this is true, working on the student without the family may not be productive. On the other hand, so far society has been unwilling to allow social workers as much authority to influence families as compared to influencing students.

Mr. Peterson's understanding of the school's relationship to families is complex, reflecting two realities. First, increasing numbers of students are without supportive

family structures. And second, Americans value the family as the core authority in children's lives. He told us:

> many parents are not equipped to do this follow up on problems and seek appropriate help. . .You're [the school personnel] the substitute parents. Dad is still sleeping, maybe he has worked the second shift, and Mom's already at work. We have kids spending as much time here as at home.

Asked how he reconciled the notion of being a substitute parent with the value Americans place on the authority of the family unit, Mr. Peterson responded, " you don't reconcile it. You recognize it. If the family structure is intact, that's great. But look at our culture today. That's not available to all students. We want to be able to assist them where we can." However, Mr. Peterson acquiesced to the authority of the family in seeking assistance, "You really can't do anything other than suggest counseling or treatment. If that family is not ready for help, there is very little you could do in terms of the family. You could do some things for the kid."

Conclusions

With regard to meeting the needs of at risk students and families, Mr. Peterson described views and patterns of behavior in his school and its relationships with other youth and family serving organizations which are, in many ways, consistent with those criticized in the literature advocating collaboration. Although he shares some of the same concerns, especially with regard to communication and gaps in services, Mr. Peterson also pointed out some important advantages of existing practices in rural districts. First, as full of promise as collaborative efforts appear to be, the flexibility and informality of the current system may be an advantage in meeting the needs of most students and families living in rural communities. The freedom to "shop around" for the most effective provider is an asset Mr. Peterson will not give up easily. And, rural families may feel more vulnerable to public humiliation if collaboration means a communication

system which automatically informs a network of local services employing individuals who the families live near and interact with frequently. On a policy making level, informal, case by case action, as Farrar and Hampel (1987) remind us, may also help communities avoid painful, controversial, ideologically based debates. Whether soul searching is good or bad for communities, such debates can be paralyzing. A related issue is whether or not the public institutions have the right to become more involved, some would say more intrusive, in the private lives of families. How much information do schools and agencies have a responsibility or a right to collect and share about students' private life or families in the name of "assisting them?" We were reminded during the Reagan/Bush/Baby Jessica era that this country places a high value on parental rights and control and on families as core institutions. Collaborative efforts that seek to provide more comprehensive services will need to grapple with this ideologically laden issue.

Second, Mr. Peterson made the point that students feel comfortable talking with individuals they know and trust and not with agencies or positions. Students, he warned, will be wary of seeking help if it means facing a new bureaucratic structure. For those seeking to provide better service delivery, this underscores the importance of creating a system that is permeable at many points and fiercely respects students' needs for privacy and trust.

Finally, conversations with Mr. Peterson suggested that a school principal, before giving support to collaborative efforts, will carefully consider the difficult question of available resources. Collaborative efforts will require additional money to support planning, personnel, training, travel, communication systems, etc. A rural principal, like Mr. Peterson, will want to know if rural areas will be able to find and sustain funding sources. Can relatively autonomous agencies with unique missions and unique traditions in training and networking refrain from engaging in "turf" battles over resources and control of services? And, is there enough time for the extraordinary leadership and work

required for planning and implementation? Regardless of how much time and money it might save eventually, setting up a collaborative system will take much up-front time. For critical leaders such as Mr. Peterson, this last commodity is already in desperately short supply. The bottom line for principals may be whether or not they are convinced that a collaborative undertaking can make an important and positive difference in the lives of children. The current view from Mr. Peterson's chair is mixed.

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Author Note

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